

Ouroboros: La Belle Dame as the Shadow of Consumption

Keat's "La Belle Dame sans Merci," despite being well-known and often-taught, especially at the secondary school level, seems to have largely escaped critical view. What little criticism does exist, though, focuses only on the knight-at-arms and La Belle Dame as an expression of supposed misogyny—the embodiment of Keats's fear of women. No time has been spent discussing the fact that its composition closely followed the death of Keats's brother Tom from tuberculosis, nor the fact that 1819 (the year of its composition and publication) was the year Keats first exhibited symptoms of his own consumption. Indeed, despite the deathly pallor that hangs over much of Keats's work, there are hints that la Belle Dame might be his Muse. His inspiration comes not only from the trials and tribulations of his professional life, but from his knowledge of his early and impending death. Though la Belle Dame is a many-leveled symbol, it must be said that she is not just the embodiment of his Muse, she is the embodiment not of an anxiety toward women, but an anxiety toward the knowledge of his impending death.

To understand this strange creature, however, one must first know what it is not. For the most part, critics tend to place Keats on the side of the scale that includes writers like Pope and Milton (albeit not quite to their degree). To these critics, Keats suffers from a sort of Napoleon Complex—an "insistence upon his own masculine authority" (Homans 565)—with women in his work in particular. Keats portrays women as subordinate because "by objectifying and subordinating figures of women in his poems, he strikes back at what he perceives to be real women's dominance" (565). The problem with this is that the figure of la Belle Dame does not fit into a specific evil archetype. In fact, "her identity as an evil demon...is not assured" (Tetreault 71). Not once in the poem is there any explicit malice toward the knight-at-arms. One could argue, of course, that her "fairy's song" (Keats line 24) is actually a siren song and that what she says in "language strange" (27) could quite logically be misconstrued as a benign invitation by the knight, but even this is tenuous. None of what she does occurs before the supposed protagonist actually makes any sort of move toward her. To be truthful, the audience can't be sure whether to "trust his version of events, which is after all is designed to garner sympathy" (Tetreault 70), so the speaker seemed to be unreliable to begin with. In terms of the supposed abduction and enthrallment, la Belle Dame once again has no active part. It is the knight who initiates. In stanza five, la Belle Dame does—for all appearances—merely happen to walk into the knight-at-arms's

range of vision. After all, he merely “met a lady in the meads” (Keats 13). Had Keats wanted to present his audience with some sort of fell creature laying in wait, he would have created a more ominous setting—or even character. The knight-at-arms, however, is the one who automatically begins the process of what could be considered worshipping. The knight “made a garland for her head/And bracelets too, and fragrant zone” (Keats 20-1) for no particular reason. This instance happens immediately after the narrator changes from the questioner in the beginning, to the pale knight, and doesn’t seem in any way logical. More illogical still is the immediate consummation of a relationship, after which the knight places la Belle Dame on his “pacing steed” (24). After decorating this strange creature, the lines “she look’d at me as she did love,/ and made sweet moan” (22-3) suggest some sort of sexual activity—not at all surprising, given the poet—though, once again, she does not initiate anything. He is still the aggressor at this point, despite the fact that he “saw nothing else all day long,/for sidelong she would bend, and sing/A fairy’s song” (25-7). Considering the knight has already begun worshipping her and has, strangely, carried her off, this has little bearing as a siren song in and of itself. The need to put the knight-at-arms in thrall is not there—he has willingly placed himself in the position of the supplicant. It isn’t until stanza seven that her status as a neutral creature becomes even somewhat ambiguous.

After they arrive at her home in the wilds, she then begins to feed him “roots of relish sweet, /And honey wild, and manna dew” (28-9). While the provided meal has the undercurrent of either hospitality or servitude, there is also a folk element to this action. La Belle Dame feeds him roots and wild honey—decidedly rustic fare, and in character considering she is some sort of fairy creature to begin with (as far as the readers can see). There is, however, a malevolent light to this. In European folklore, partaking of fairy food will cause the unfortunate human in the equation to be either trapped in fairyland or to be under a fairy’s (or fairies in general) power. This, however, is the only actual connection to a succubus character that la Belle Dame has, and is one of the few possible actions that could even be construed as malevolent to begin with. Had Keats intended to subordinate or to even demonize women in any way, he would have used corresponding language and imagery—not the vague neutrality that compromises la Belle Dame’s character. Even more problematic for the subordination theory is the fact that, after the knight-at-arms eats the fairy food without coercion, la Belle Dame does little else to actually seduce him. Though she lulled him to sleep (36), she disappears after the dream in which la Belle Dame’s former victims warn the knight-at-arms that he, too, will share their fate. What makes this hard to pin down through that line of thinking is the fact that she has slipped away while he slept. Of course, this could be read as a desire, and inability, to control the feminine, and a “fear of becoming enthralled and cast out of his lady’s world” (Schoemaker 90)—that he will find himself in over his head, only to be disappointed and, eventually, left by the object of his desires. The idea that both the poem and the character “perhaps [conceal] a fear of women

as independent and self determining” (Tretault 71) has been brought forward, but Keats also considered himself (or any other artist) to have little control over his own Muse.

Considering an artist’s Muse is generally considered female, her sex may have been a side-effect rather than a cause—and something few scholars tend to acknowledge. However, these same critics don’t stop at Keats’s poetry, there is also his rather voluminous collections of letters.

The most often quoted of the supposed misogynistic statements in Keats’s letters is the sentence-fragment—by Keats himself—that he has “not a right attitude toward women” (*Letters* 1:99). What they fail to acknowledge is that Keats does eventually explain the reason for this attitude and why it isn’t right. According to the letter in question, he had placed such high expectations on women during his earlier youth that no real woman could actually live up to the ideal that had quite permanently (or so we could be led to believe from what he mentioned) fixed itself in his psyche. This is the attitude, and Keats is well aware that it isn’t a very normal or logical train of thought. He asks the recipient of his letter to attribute his strange thoughts to “perversity to [his] being disappointed since Boyhood” (1:99). In other words—in part—he is unable to find his mythical ideal and is therefore disappointed. In his letters, he also admitted: “among Women I have evil thoughts, malice spleen—I cannot speak or be silent—I am full of Suspicions” (1:99), giving rise to suspicions of woman-hating outside the (possibly) romantic sphere. At the same time, however, he considers women to be “perhaps equal” and did not “like to think insults in a Lady’s Company” (1:99.). While Keats may have been frustrated by women in both romantic and intellectual relationships, it is doubtful he was doing little more than reflecting the attitudes at the time. It was, as Tetreault observes “less diabolical than commonplace” (Tetreault 65). Keats even goes as far to mock a group of women who believe that “he who abuses women and slights them—loves them the most” (*Letters* 2:159). While he could be considered sexist by modern terms, it is rather tame, even by 19th century standards. He was clearly no Milton or Pope in terms of outward distaste for or even hatred toward women.

That being said, the attitude expressed toward the female character in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” is little more than frustration with a Muse-figure rather than with women as a whole. This same idea that la Belle Dame is a Muse-figure leads to the question of what exactly his muse-figure was—what exactly (or as exactly as one can be in this situation) inspired Keats to write much of what he did. Considering Keats’s obviously melancholy tone through a number of his poems and his odes, one could imagine the source of much of inspiration came from an equally melancholy source. That is to say, it is widely acknowledged that Keats took some of his inspiration from the specter of consumption that had loomed over his life from childhood. Having watched his mother die of tuberculosis while he was very young, not to mention his time as an apothecary and the fact that he personally nursed his brother Tom until his death of the very same disease, the presence of what he would have known as consumption was constantly asserting itself in his life in some

way or another. One of the ones most applicable to his career is the fact that tuberculosis—consumption—had certain connotations and it was, in fact, considered a ‘romantic disease.’

In the early 19th Century, not only was the cause and transmission of tuberculosis misunderstood, it was considered to be a sort of extension of hypochondria in its modern sense. The popular opinion seemed to be that consumption was the “physical result of psychological and emotional disorder” (Lawlor 120) and that “literary over-production, derived from over-stimulation led to medical consumption because it *consumed* vital energy” (120, emphasis added)—hence, ‘consumption.’ The mental strain of composition burnt up a person’s vital force, something that an individual only had a limited amount of. Of course, there was also the fact that the “idea of consumption as a disease of genius grew even more common in medical texts as well as in popular opinion” (121)—these romantic and erroneous ideas were reinforced by the public and by the medical experts of the time. Considering, as mentioned before, Keats witnessed tuberculosis on the personal level it is highly doubtful that he was ignorant of this. One can also assume that he didn’t question the common medical opinions on consumption as “Keats and his doctor did agree that his malady was as much mental as physical. Nervous over-excitement was the danger for young men of a consumptive and creative disposition” (Lawlor 155). While hypochondria is always a factor in sickness, it is clear that—at least in the case of artists like Keats—the malady was considered more of a psychological disruption than anything and endemic to the male creative population. Of course, if tuberculosis affected Keats’s life at such a personal level, then it would naturally filter into his poetry.

In “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” the specter of tuberculosis shows itself more in the poet-figure of the knight-at-arms than in the Muse-figure of la Belle Dame—his condition being the rather physical effect of his night with la Belle Dame. From the beginning, the knight-at-arms is introduced to the audience as “alone and palely loitering” (Keats 2), and that the atmosphere reflects his rather depressing state. According to both the knight and the anonymous narrator of the first three stanzas, the “sedge has wither’d from the lake,/ And no birds sing” (2-3), and “the squirrel’s granary is full./ And the harvest’s done” (7-8). It is, obviously, autumn—a very cold, barren autumn to match the knight who is all “haggard and woe-begone” (6). However, the setting is merely a lead-in for the more obvious sickness imagery in the third stanza. The anonymous narrator has this to say to the knight-at-arms: “I see a lily on thy brow/With anguish moist and fever dew,/And on thy cheeks a fading rose/ Fast withereth, too” (12-15). The flower imagery here is twofold. The immediate affect is that the knight-at-arms is proven to be literally pale—hence the lily—and that there is a color fast-fading in his cheeks. It is also worthy of note that “flower imagery was closely associated with the poetry of consumption, its major function being to symbolise the poignancy of (early) death juxtaposed with beauty” (Lawlor 132). Considering Keats’s “first dramatic symptom of consumption appeared in early February [1819], after Tom’s death,” (135) the flower imagery takes on another morbid level—in this case, a veiled comment

about his own impending demise. As a student of medicine (such as it was at the time), he would have known the warning signs of tuberculosis well in advance and, after watching his brother slowly die of the same disease only a few short months before, the idea that he was soon to follow most likely weighed heavily on him. This, of course, would explain his preoccupation with the knight-at-arms who is wasting away in “La Belle Dame sans Merci.” It is the tinge of sickness—be it supernatural or psychosomatic—and the aspect of misery, and of suffering, and more importantly the idea that la Belle Dame’s victims waste away.

To understand this poem as it is connected to the idea of consumption and the Muse, one must not look solely at the aforementioned flower imagery, but at the fact that Keats is discussing his Muse as a fickle figure, as well. In general, Keats viewed a poet and the Muse (his own included) as one of minor antagonism, which gives a bit of a poet-muse dynamic to the knight-at-arms and la Belle Dame in the poem itself. When speaking about another person and their personal Muse, Keats comments that “if he libels his own Muse how can he expect to write—either [the writer] or his muse must turn [tail]” (*Letters* 2:159). One of them must chase the other, strangely, giving this relationship a strange sort of hunter-hunted (to wax dramatic) quality. After all, is this not what happens in “La Belle Dame sans Merci?” The knight-at-arms, after cavorting with la Belle Dame, is left high and dry “on the cold hill’s side”(Keats 47) where he is “alone and palely loitering,” (49). Her flight from her grotto, in turn, ties into the strangely welcoming attitude of this strange, fairy creature—the Muse has ‘turned tail,’ quite literally at the end when she supposedly abandons the knight-at-arms in his sleep, thus outsmarting the poet-hunter who has, if we put it in the context of Keats’s ideas, slighted her in some way. This hunter-hunted dynamic isn’t the most important aspect of the Muse and Keats’s inspiration, though. The idea of suffering and beauty with the undercurrent of sickness and death are ever-present.

In the vein of Charlotte Turner Smith, the Romantic idea of sensibility extended to both sides of the spectrum. For both the poet in question and Keats, the poetry tended to fall on the melancholy end. However, the more pertinent of the information tends to focus on the idea of sensibility and how Keats showed this desirable poetic quality. This, in turn, circles back to the question of what inspired Keats—what compromised a fraction of his Muse. Keats, his Odes falling into the category of melancholy poetry, drew inspiration from his own miseries, one of which was the presence of tuberculosis in his life especially in 1819 when both his Odes and “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” were composed. With the death so recent, and the first symptoms of his own sickness showing themselves in February, it is quite safe to say that this death sentence—as, indeed, tuberculosis was in the 19th Century—could be a very logical source of anxiety for him. In fact, as Keats mentioned in one of his letters to Fanny Brawne, he had “two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your loveliness and the hour of my death” (*Letters* 2: 178). This fixation of the darker side of sensibility also shows in Keats’s “Ode on Melancholy.”

The poem itself is “neither an intimate narration, nor an invocation, but rather an exposition...it apparently addresses *us*” (Smith 681). Keats—or, rather, the narrator—gives his reader the exact directions on how to glean inspiration from their misery. The audience is advised to “go not to Lethe, neither twist/Wolf’s-bane...nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss’d/by nightshade” (Keats 474, lines 1-4) and goes on to continue a catalogue “morbid thoughts and morbid props” (Smith 686), such as death’s-head moths, and deathwatch beetles. These things, however, are not the point—they are what one avoids. The ‘moral’ of this story is that one must avoid dwelling on death in order to fully feel and be inspired by Melancholy (like la Belle Dame, personified as female). This is mildly ironic coming from someone who was so haunted by death from illness. Instead, “when the melancholy fit shall fall” (11), one must “glut they sorrow on a morning rose” (15)—focus on something beautiful. Strangely, though, Keats even suggests that “if thy mistress some rich anger shows...let her rave” (18-9) and, instead, “feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes” (20)—seize the opportunity and, in a typically Keatsian eating metaphor, take this as an opportunity to gain inspiration. This is, however, more peripheral—the most pertinent part of the poem is stanza three, in which Keats describes the kind of beauty that one finds in clutches of Melancholy. This is the kind of beauty and inspiration that the knight-at-arms experiences in “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” and—as one can surmise from the dramatic emphasis Melancholy receives in this particular Ode—the same sort that Keats used as he drew from the miseries that abounded in his own life.

Of sorrow, Keats had this to say in his letters: “Byron says, “Knowledge is Sorrow”; and I go on to say that ‘Sorrow is Wisdom’” (*Letters* 1:80). In “Ode on Melancholy,” he goes on to say that sorrow (of a sort) is beauty, or even enhances already-present beauty. Melancholy, itself—or, as it is personified here, *her*—“dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die” (Keats 21), where Joy is forever “bidding adieu” (21), where everything is transient. However, just as this is fading beauty and parting joy, this pleasure also turns “to poison while the bee-mouth sips” (22). In fewer words, this is a bittersweet sort of inspiration—a poisonous Muse, if one would. Much like how the knight-at-arms is possibly trapped by the wild foods offered by la Belle Dame, so is the poet faced with the same hazards. However, despite this poison and this dying beauty, this is the feeling one needs to embrace. No poet can reach this hallowed place, save for “him whose strenuous tongue/Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate” (27-8) and “taste the sadness of her might,/And be among her cloudy trophies hung” (29-30). Eating and negative capability are combined in the closing stanza and lines of the ode in a decidedly morbid and somewhat violent end. Joy’s grape must not only be consumed, it must be “burst,” and those poets who are able to take advantage of what Melancholy can give are not poets—artists—but “trophies.” They have become victims “of poetry, or rather, of the muse that melancholy became for poetry” (Haverkamp 703). These are not trophies of failure (703), per se, but trophies of the poets who have sacrificed themselves and their careers—much like the knight-at-arms and the “pale kings,

and princes too, /pale warriors” (Belle Dame 41-2)—for this painful beauty. Of course, the only thing, as far as the modern reader can tell, that held more of bittersweet taste for Keats than his rather disastrous career and personal life, was his own battle with tuberculosis and the idea that he could fall victim to it at any time.

The point of the poem seemed to be that, when faced with such a misery that would send a person running for oblivion one developed a “heightened awareness of beauty or vitality, and...the fragility of that beauty” (Smith 687). This is why, in stanza 2, one’s mistress shows “rich anger” (Keats 18)—rather than negative, this is something beautiful—and there are rainbows in the ocean spray (16), and why one must “glut thy sorrow on a morning rose” (15), a thing of beauty to focus on during one’s melancholy fit. While it is best not to automatically conflate Keats with the speaker of “Ode on Melancholy,” it would be irresponsible to disregard this ode as merely a work of art as opposed to an explicit statement of this melancholy philosophy—as it very well is. Naturally, he had quite a bit of experience with his mistress, Melancholy, and the shadow of deadly sickness that she often represented during late 1818 and 1819. Such is obvious in both his attitude toward consumption and what the reader can see in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” itself.

It has since been established that the knight-at-arms was the one to initiate with la Belle dame. While it is unclear who was responsible for the sexual part of their encounter, it is the knight who does everything else—he decorates the object of his desires with flowers in flattery/worship, he is the one that put her on the horse and, of course, he accepts her food without a second thought. It was not until they arrived at the home of this strange creature that la Belle Dame took obvious control. She was the one who “took [him] to her elfin grot” (Keats 32) and she “lulled [him] asleep” (36). Though she was the orchestrator of whatever had happened between them on the hillside, there has been speculation that the figure of the knight-at-arms and, indeed, Keats, “could be seen as a willing victim to consumptive creativity” (Lawlor 140). The fact that la Belle Dame as the Muse is portrayed as female is only following the conventions of the time—what is more important is the fact that she drains her victims. Or, one could argue, her victims let her drain them. There is a level of helplessness beyond negative capability involved—just as there is helplessness in sickness.

During the sleep after their dalliance, the knight-at-arms has a warning dream—“the latest dream [he] ever dream’d” (Keats 38)—by what seem to be the loitering shades of la Belle Dame’s past victims. The narrator “saw pale kings, and princes too,/Pale warriors, death pale were they all” (41-2)—pale just as he had become in the present. This is a word with a number of contexts, though the one that could be most logically associated with Keats’s poet figure could be the one with connotations of sickness and death. While these shades are pale, they are also somewhat withered figures. The knight-at-arms describes them as having “starv’d lips” (44) that “gaped wide” (45) while they gave their dream-time warning. Attention, then, is turned to what these ghosts are starved for—the obvious answer of ‘life’ aside. Just as the grape in “Ode on Melancholy” must be burst in order to feel the

mighty and toxic creative force of Melancholy, so must the poet (more specifically, the knight-at-arms) waste away under her influence as his life-energy is burnt away—even if she is ethereal and supposedly absent. Since these great men don't waste away until they have had their encounters with la Belle Dame herself, she acquires the connotation of pestilence. She is only beautiful because, as Keats has explained, the misery of the situation has heightened her beauty in her role as the Muse. The wasted figures of past victims also offer a rather graphic look at a victim of consumption in the physical sense. Medical science in the early 1800's can offer one example of an allusion.

At the time, as mentioned before, treatments such as “indiscriminate bloodletting” (*White Death* 14)—which occurred “every time he [Keats, in his own treatment] coughed up blood” (14)—as well as special (starvation) diets and strenuous exercise while sick. While, during the composition of “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” Keats had not gone through any of these treatments himself, he would've been more than conscious of their existence. He might even have used or have seen them used on his brother (though this is unclear and entirely conjecture). On top of these rather strange and decidedly counterproductive applications of ‘medicine,’ tuberculosis is a wasting sickness in and of itself. Looking at the pale men through a medical lens, the pallor ties even more in with the flower imagery discussed before. These are kings, princes, warriors—great men who have gone *before* their time. Not only that, but the knight-at-arms himself is pale and feverish, the universal sign of sickness. The line about ‘starved lips’ takes on a new meaning as an image of the tuberculosis victim who is wasting away from both sickness and what the world has since seen as counterproductive medical measures of bleeding and starvation diets.

Given his experience with poetic, medical and, social misfortune, Keats very logically took the route of the melancholy poet. Drawing on personal experiences as well as on his own imagination, of course, echoes of his problems haunt his writing, both fiction and non-fiction alike. The specter of tuberculosis, of course, hung heavily around his shoulders after his brother's death of the same disease. To add insult to a sort of injury, both “Ode on Melancholy” and “La Belle Dame sans Merci” were composed only a month or so after he first exhibited symptoms of the disease himself. Of course, with this in mind and Keats's subscription to the genre of melancholy poetry to begin with, one of the most obvious sources for his inspiration would come from this imminent and decidedly horrible sickness. Just as the knight-at-arms was pale yet flushed with fever, so too did he know he would meet the same fate—marched farther and faster on by his consumptive Muse as his vital force was burned away in chase.

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